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## The Real Chair of Cassiopeia

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# *The Real Chair of Cassiopeia*

In 1951, Ellen Austin's father put on a pair of sunglasses that looked like goggles and sat in a lawn chair to watch an atomic bomb test. He wasn't alone. Lots of other men wearing goggles sat in similar chairs which were arranged in orderly rows on the sand of the desert. Many of the men wore shorts. She still has a picture of this that her father gave her the afternoon he returned home.

Though the bomb went off at night, the men in the picture appear to be sitting on a bench at mid-day. These observers were illuminated by the light from the blast. When the bomb went off, her father lifted his hand to protect his vision and wound up looking through the flesh to the bone. His hand had turned into an x-ray right before his eyes.

He told her this when he got home in a voice that was filled with awe and a sense of privilege. She was nine at the time and she has never forgotten that afternoon when, half-kneeling beside her as she sat in the back-yard swing of the old house in Louisiana, he told her about holding up his hand to shield his eyes, and gave her a photograph. The amazing thing for her was, after that afternoon, for reasons she has never completely understood and never felt courageous enough to explore, he disappeared from her life.

HE DISAPPEARED from her life until one evening, thirty-odd years later, when she picked up the phone and heard a voice drained of almost everything that voices have, a voice which, except for a trace of New Orleans in the vowels, could have been generated by a computer. "This is Corbett Austin," the voice said, "And I'd like to speak to my daughter Ellen."

"This is Ellen." She stood without allowing herself a breath and felt a needle and thread working their way up through her body taking stitches, making everything tighter.

"You're not Ellen," this shell of a voice said. "I have a daughter Ellen. I'd like to speak to her. This is Corbett Austin, her father."

After something muttered which Ellen couldn't understand, a woman said, "I'm a nurse here. He's confused. He expected a little girl. He'll understand later. He's in a veteran hospital right here in Los Angeles. He has leukemia. You should probably come."

Then Corbett took the phone again. "Tell Ellen that Corbett Austin, her father, is dying."

YEARS AGO, the same year that her father saw the bomb go off, Ellen had been in Girl Scouts and she very much wanted a badge called the Star Badge which involved knowing constellations and being able to use the night sky for orientation. It just so happened that the next door neighbor, a Miss Galena Belov, had an interest in the stars and offered to instruct Ellen.

"Cassiopeia's Chair is that W-shaped configuration of stars," Miss Galena had said, pointing. "It's right there between Cepheus and Perseus. Cassiopeia did an awful thing, you know..."

A follower of Madame Blavatsky, Miss Galena not only showed Ellen the patterns made by the stars against the sky, but she told stories that the Greeks had made up, and then rambled on about transmutations of the soul, sylphs in the air, and salamanders in the fire.

Whenever the night was clear that autumn, Ellen would go next door, and then, after Miss Galena threw on her shawl, the two of them would go out into the cool evening and sit on lawn chairs, much as Corbett had, and, like Corbett, turn their eyes skyward--looking for signs in the heavens.

TONIGHT, HOLDING a glass of wine in a shaking hand, Ellen stands on the deck of her house in Los Angeles and tries to recall those evenings in Louisiana. She has just put down the telephone after talking to her father, and the conjunction of her father's call and this evening's sky has opened the door to this recollection--a recollection she finds disturbing without understanding why. She scans the sky to locate Cassiopeia but none of the stars she can see in the light-blurred night seems quite right.

Her hand is shaking because of the call from her father. Her hand is shaking because suddenly she is afraid. Though her daughter is inside lying in a pool of light on the living-room floor writing something for a class tomorrow, Ellen feels completely alone. She feels that there is something out there and she has been abandoned to it.

"I JUST got a call from Corbett," Ellen says into the phone. An hour or so has passed and the terror subsided enough that she has decided to call Louisiana to talk to her mother. She holds a second glass of wine in a hand which seems almost steady.

"Corbett... Your father?" Ellen can hear her mother Winnie's

voice falter and lose the schoolgirl brightness she always affects on the phone.

"That Corbett. I don't know any others."

"Well, I guess I should hear what he wants," her mother says. Her voice is guarded now. "Not that it matters to me."

"He has leukemia. He's here in Los Angeles in a hospital and he wants to see me." Ellen can feel the constriction begin again. She is speaking as flatly as she can. She doesn't want to tilt anything.

"Corbett ... dying?" Winnie's voice changes again and takes on the years she usually manages to avoid.

"I thought you should know."

"Yes," her mother says and her voice changes again, re-constructs itself. "Well, I think I should come."

Ellen has not expected this. "Mother... You've been divorced from him for thirty-five years. You've had two husbands since then."

Her mother sighs. "I just think I'll never forgive myself if I don't. It's never too late to set old wrongs right."

"DOES ANYONE join Girl Scouts anymore?" Ellen asks her daughter.

Caitlin, thirteen, rolls over on the rug and lifts both legs and studies her feet. Ellen can see that she has just painted her toes alternating shades of silver and blue. "I don't know. They had Campfire girls when we lived in Encino but I didn't know anyone in them. Why?"

"I just got a call from your grandfather."

Caitlin sits up. "Your father? The one you haven't seen for years?"

"Yes. He's ill. He's right here in a hospital. I'm going to see him tomorrow."

"Do you think he'll get well?" Caitlin asks, and Ellen can see her daughter weighing things. Caitlin has never known a grandfather, and Ellen watches the girl try to know whether she has any reason to expect anything--in case she might be disappointed. It surprises Ellen tonight to realize that she has raised such a cautious child.

"I'll know more after I see him," Ellen says. "Winnie is flying out too. So I guess there'll be a reunion of sorts."

"That'll be nice," Caitlin says in a voice that seems to Ellen to mirror her own anxieties, her own inability to sound an optimistic note. "Why did you want to know about Girl Scouts?"

"Just something I remembered. I'd earned a badge while my father was away and I wanted to show it to him, but he left before

I could. I had to learn to identify some constellations. The only one I can remember is Cassiopeia, but I couldn't find it tonight when I went out on the deck."

"It's hard to see stars here because of all the smog and lights," Caitlin says, matter-of-fact once more. "If you want to see stars you should drive to the desert."

"I guess you're right," Ellen says and turns to go back to the kitchen.

"I talked to Dad this afternoon," Caitlin says. "He has to be in Denver on business Monday morning and he has to fly out on Sunday, so he wants to come for me Friday afternoon instead of Saturday."

Ellen resists her first impulse to be annoyed at this change of plans. "Fine."

"I'll still get to see Winnie, and ..." She pauses. Her pause makes Ellen sad. Caitlin tonight looks too young to be so concerned.

"Do you want to see your grandfather?" Ellen asks.

"I don't know yet. How do you feel about it?"

"I don't know yet either," Ellen says.

CORBETT AUSTIN is hairless, gaunt and gray, and connected to tubes going in and coming out. An oxygen mask over his lower face makes another claim on his identity. His eyes are closed, for which Ellen is grateful. It gives her time to catch her breath and to study him. She had expected to be shocked and she is. She wonders for a second if she is too late--if he is already dead. It would seem impossible for a live person to look more corpse-like. But the hand which is not linked to the hospital plumbing moves, a jerk as if to brush away an insect. She tiptoes up. Touches that hand.

He opens his eyes, confused. He needs time to focus. They are the same cobalt blue eyes she sees every day in the mirror and she is startled to recognize something of herself in this pared-down face on the pillow. He tries to raise his head but can't. He sticks out his tongue, a tentative pale thing, and tries to lick his lips. He moves his mouth, seems to realize he is not speaking, and tries again.

"I'm Ellen," she whispers. "Your daughter ... Ellen." She waits until there's a spark in the eyes, and then a sigh and then a groan as his talon fingers grasp hers. His groan is an instrument that tightens her breathing as she studies him--this man, here, at last, before her. She has spent years thinking about him and years trying not to. She has been angry and she has longed for him; she has dreamed of searching for him to beg him to return; she has

dreamed of looking into countless doors opening off endless corridors for him. And now he lies here and her search is over.

"You were sitting in the swing," he says when he finally speaks. "You had on a yellow dress."

"A yellow dress ..." she says and finds that she's trembling and her lips have become as dry as his. She does remember. Of course, she remembers, but the fact that he can remember too makes her heart begin to pound. She wants to lie to him right now. She wants to tell him that she can't remember, that there never was a yellow dress. She wants to lie in order to deny him the right to that memory. He took the memory and left the child. The skirt had a band of white rick-rack around the hem. She remembers plucking at the rick-rack. She had just turned ten. It was spring. She didn't like the dress. It had a sash. Babyish. Older girls wore belts. She plucked at the rick-rack and waited for him.

She had kissed him at the front door. She had hugged him. She had been waiting, had seen the taxi drive up. The braid on his shoulder scratched her cheek. He smelled like cigarette smoke and tiredness, but he held her, lifting her off the ground and whirling her around. It was almost like flying. One of her sandals flew off with the speed of the whirling.

But then he saw Winnie coming out of the bedroom upstairs to stand on the landing and he put Ellen down. "Go on outside and wait for me," he said. She went outside and sat in the swing where she could watch the house. She watched and waited and when, much later, he came back out into the yard she knew something had changed and things would be different forever.

He groans now and looks up, but his gaze has lost its focus. She feels herself receding. "I remember," she tells him. "I remember," but his eyes are closed and he appears to have fallen asleep.

"You should probably leave now," a nurse says a few minutes later. "He had his injection just before you came and he'll be out for a while."

WINNIE LOOKS wonderful as she walks out of the tube from the Delta flight from New Orleans. Winnie's hair is blonder than Ellen remembers it, but not brassy. She wears a voguish suit in a pale cream and has managed to keep a gardenia fresh on her lapel.

"Is the flower from home?" Ellen says as the smell of the flower mingles with her mother's powder and hairspray, and her mother's stiff hair tickles her nose.

"No, I bought it at the airport," Winnie says. "I love the scent. I just sat breathing it in all the way here." She looks at



Ellen and Ellen finds herself wincing under her mother's scrutiny. "You've lost weight. How's the divorce going?"

"We're being civilized," Ellen says and stops her tongue before she can recite the litany she has been repeating to herself lately--at least *my* former husband still sees our daughter, at least *he* hasn't disappeared, at least *I* haven't driven him away from *her* forever.

"After the first divorce, the rest are easy," Winnie says. "Have you seen your father yet?"

"Yesterday. He looked terrible. I thought he was dead when I went into the room."

"Oh, dear," Winnie says and her face releases the rigid smile she's been wearing. Ellen picks up her mother's bag and turns away so as not to have to look. "Oh, dear," Winnie repeats.

"I don't know why you came," Ellen says. "It's been years. It's just going to be painful."

"I felt I needed to," Winnie says.

THERE IS no one outside of Corbett's room. Ellen opens the door for Winnie and then walks down the hall to a small waiting room where an Asian family sits staring at a game show on a television set in the corner. They all lean forward with looks of concern on their faces as the bright-eyed host on the set motions and curtains are pulled back to reveal fabulous prizes that Ellen can't imagine anyone wanting.

She turns to a vending machine and puts in money for a can of sugarless caffeine-free soda and pushes a button. When nothing comes out below she gets a chance to pound on the machine, a gesture which does not dispel, but only primes the pump of her anger. She has been angry for years at the two people in the room down the hall. It is a sad sort of anger, an anger like a battered toy that she has clutched and refused to abandon. It is an anger she would like to stuff in a trash can. She pounds again and the Asian family turns to look at her with polite but real distress. The can rolls down some invisible tunnel and almost leaps out of the slot to fall at her feet.

"I'M TRYING to put things in order now, and there are things I should tell you," Winnie says as Ellen drives them back home along the freeway. Winnie's perfect hair is disheveled and her eyes are red. "I was a very young woman then. And Corbett was gone all of the time."

Ellen grips the steering wheel as her breathing grows shallow.

"I was having an affair with someone," Winnie continues, staring straight ahead. "He was married. I was married. It was

an awful thing to do but I thought I was in love with this other man. Someone in town wrote your father. He came back that day to ask me to give up the other man. I didn't want to and so your father left. He sent money for you. He was good about that, but he couldn't stand any of it. I wanted more, you know, than just sitting around waiting for him to come home from wherever that stupid Army sent him."

As Winnie parts with the words, Ellen's head begins to throb. This can't be all, she thinks. This can't be it--this sad confession after so many years--this paltry revelation. And yet her mother leans back when the words are spoken as if she's said all she needed to say. The words are out and Winnie looks spent, used up.

"But you loved Corbett, didn't you?" Ellen asks. It sounds to her, as she says it, like the question of a child, like something Caitlin would ask.

"That's why I flew here." Winnie's voice is like the voice on a telephone thousands of miles away. "That's why I came. I wanted him to know I'd always loved him."

Her mother is quiet again, her eyes closed. Ellen moves into the right-hand lane, turns off the freeway and onto a surface street where she pulls the car beside a curb. They park under a budding sycamore tree. A boy rides by on a bicycle and pops a wheelie. It seems to Ellen to be a time to say something, but she still doesn't know the question to ask. "Do you remember our neighbor years ago, the one in the little house on the corner, Miss Galena?" she says finally.

"God yes! She was that smelly old Russian," Winnie answers. The question has the effect of reviving her. She opens her eyes and blinks as though getting ready to see something completely new. "She filled your mind with a lot of nonsense, I do remember that. She was some odd religion."

"She taught me to identify the constellations for a badge for Girl Scouts. She told me the story of Cassiopeia who put her daughter Andromeda on a rock to be eaten by a sea monster. Cassiopeia had offended the gods and she had to make a sacrifice."

"What a terrible story!" Winnie says and looks shocked. "Well, I don't remember any of that. It was so long ago."

"Did Corbett tell you about the blast when he got home that day? Did he tell you about seeing his hand turn into an x-ray in front of his eyes?"

"Oh, God, Ellen honey, why are you asking me all this?" Winnie says and looks away. "I don't think he told me that. I really don't remember. We had other things, more important things, to talk about."



AFTER DINNER that evening Ellen leaves Winnie and Caitlin sitting at their kitchen table, their heads together over a deck of cards. She tells them she's going for a drive, not to wait up for her. She's a little surprised by how easily they accept this, how involved they are in their game.

She drives south toward the interchange and turns onto the freeway heading east. As soon as she's over the mountains she'll drop onto the Mojave and then she'll see the sky. There'll be stars. She'll find the chair of the queen who put her daughter on a rock. She knows it's crazy, but she needs to do it.

EVENTUALLY, THE mountains are behind and the night is hot in the way that only the desert night can be. She remembers how she woke in the dark and found herself alone in the big old house. She remembers her fear and her mouth dries.

Ellen, the girl, had wondered as Miss Galena told the story what the real chair of Cassiopeia looked like. Was it a throne? Or merely a chair like the ones in their kitchen? Or, was it, perhaps, like the small chair with the flowered cushion that Winnie sat on when she studied her face in the mirror of her dressing table? Ellen, the woman, wonders how much Miss Galena knew about Winnie. Ellen wonders about the motives of ancient storytellers who paired bright spots burning in the void with tales of terror and abandonment.

She stops at a gas station to go to the bathroom and to buy coffee from a machine. A little beyond the gas station there's a side road, a narrow thing, one lane. She turns onto it. Of course, it's crazy.

The road climbs a bit and twists to avoid a small hill. She downshifts and presses on the gas. Then the pavement stops abruptly and she's going too fast to miss the sharp rocks that suddenly appear in her lights. She curses and isn't surprised a moment later when the steering becomes difficult and the car veers to the right.

The tire is flat. More than flat, it has lost all of its air and is already peeling itself from the rim in a disheartening way that she isn't prepared for. There is another tire in the trunk and a jack and so on, but these events are just enough to make her feel both foolish and exhausted. She gets out and stands beside the car. She's trembling. She has to hold onto the door for a moment until the shaking subsides.

She had wanted to walk out into the desert to look at the sky. Now, this seems beside the point. There are stars enough, and the desert is there, but she's tired, and in this tiredness she realizes that she knows all she is going to know. She rests her head on the roof of the car. On the highway below a truck backfires.

*Robin Beeman*

## *Early Shift*

What moves him to wake  
from dark into dark,  
to wander sleep-baffled  
from bed to the lighted hall?  
What shakes the dream out,  
this slow acceptance in?  
He pulls back the curtain,  
sees the homes of his neighbors,  
faces what makes him daily  
rise, the spin of wheels  
and gears that requires him  
to dress his body, one arm,  
one leg at a time, and feed it.  
He passes each morning the beds  
of his children, touches his lips  
to the rise and fall of their sheets,  
but resists his desire  
to lift their charmed bodies  
and carry them with him,  
never speaks to calm  
the muttering that breaks  
from his wife as she sleeps.  
What in that blue dawn makes him  
shine his car lights into day,  
knowing when he comes back  
none of this will be changed?

*Martha Wickelhaus*